

# “We Were Different Then”

## Indigenous Women in Rural Guatemala and the “War-Widow” Category

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*Cet article veut démontrer les disparités entre le terme “veuve de guerre” présent dans trop d’œuvres littéraires au Guatemala de l’après-guerre civile et les individus que ce terme cherche à décrire.*

*Este artículo se propone demostrar las disparidades entre el término ‘viuda de guerra’ presente en la literatura escrita después de la guerra civil en Guatemala y las individuos reales que el término trata de describir.*

Social scientists who write about Guatemala’s state violence surrounding the 36-year civil war, at its height in the early 1980s, ending in 1996, and resulting in the estimated death or disappearance of at least 140,000 people, often claim that Maya who suffered the majority of the aggression were either the innocent victims of the army or the naïve constituency of the guerilla. This paper considers early feminist works in the post-conflict period as part of an overlooked feminist literature, as it reflected on at the roles of women in the process of post-conflict reconstruction and the national recovery from the scorched earth campaign carried out by the Guatemalan military against the Maya.

This paper looks critically at three early feminist interpretations of Guatemalan post-conflict widowhood: Victoria Sanford’s *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (2003), Judith Zur’s *Violent Memories: Mayan War-widows in Guatemala* (1998) and Linda Green’s *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala* (1999). Given the space constraints, only the two earlier texts will be dealt with here; both Green’s *Fear as a Way of Life* and Zur’s *Violent Memories* were published at a significant time in Guatemalan history and during the post-conflict reconstruction, yet neither have been adequately critiqued by feminists. Sanford’s more recent work deserves a separate and more extensive critique with reference to recent literature. In all three texts, gender is an important component in the documented oral histories, especially as

women are represented as wives and widows. To varying degrees, these texts use the testimonies of women to bear witness to the repression suffered by the Guatemalan Maya. All rely on interviews and write life histories and personal narratives in an effort to give voice to underrepresented women’s experiences during the civil war.

Maya women often noted the “difference” they felt in their communities and their personal identities before and after the civil war; many were required to take on leadership roles in their community and in the guerilla warfare that they were not accustomed to. As a development worker in Guatemala, I was able to note in very concrete ways how the military campaign had developed as a massacre not just of the enemy but of the general population, and how the legacy of this violence continues to influence the work of local leaders and organizations. In light of my work with *Ajpu*, I became interested in community incorporation into state structures, particularly women, who continued to maintain a certain level of autonomy from the state and formed the majority of those who placed a Maya identity above a Guatemalan one. Women in Chiché’s rural communities, for example, are less likely to go to state-sponsored educational institutions, more likely to maintain Mayan language as their primary language, and less likely to enter the formal labour force. In addition, I began to make connections between *Ajpu*’s revolutionary past and its members’ present actions, in terms of their relationship with the state and at what point women who were leaders among the insurgents were forced to retreat to traditional roles.

Beginning with Chandra Mohanty’s analysis of the tendency of western feminist researchers to universalize and normalize the experiences of “Third World women” and portray them as victims, my goal is to articulate to what extent local experience in the Guatemalan highlands actually corresponded with the opinions of these researchers. Did individual feminist researchers consider the significance of their research in these communities? To

what extent does a theoretical category and homogenous field of knowledge surround these women's lives? Are there marked differences between the ideological construct of "war-widows" and the actual lives of women who remain agents of their own histories? Is there an assumption of universal unity based on a specific understanding of the loss of their husbands in a war?

This work begins by questioning the assumptions of feminist work on Guatemalan widows and is based on conversations with members of the Maya women's group *Ajpu*, named for the day of the Maya calendar on which the group was formed. *Ajpu* currently has approximately 700 members who represent 18 rural communities of the municipality of Chiché in the Guatemalan highlands of El Quiché, the area with the highest Indigenous population that suffered the vast majority of recorded violence during the Civil War from 1960 to 1996. In this paper, I look at *Ajpu* women's specific role in the insurgency 30 years ago and how it relates to the current identity of their organization. Here I represent women in the Maya community where I lived and worked for two and a half years not only as widows and victims of such violence, but as a collective group of active opponents to the army's campaign.

I do this consciously, mainly because these three feminist works I have chosen to juxtapose with my own experiences often reinforce the victimhood of Maya women, play up their vulnerability, and remain indicative of the Guatemalan army's ideological claims that the only victims of the war were those who can claim complete ignorance of the guerilla movement. Lack of understanding of women's experiences of the war denies the development of women as politically conscious subjects, as though Maya women were disempowered and suffered at all points in the past, were later widowed, and then became conscious of their larger situation only as a result. Such assumptions present Maya women as reclaimers of their previously denied human rights who are now fully able to do and act as they wish, ignoring ongoing state repression and militarization in Maya communities as well as the many socio-political constraints such women face when attempting to organize. Judith Zur, for example, argues that her work is an attempt to analyze "how widows experienced their losses" (36-8), while Linda Green attempts to deal with how widows recover from post-traumatic stress and attempts to articulate how the violence affected widowed women when their husbands died. Even this type of phrasing, which assumes women as wives and widows before considering what their own political action may have been, aids in the assumption of women as naturally innocent conservers of traditional familial structures.

The war was initiated as a grassroots response to the military takeover of the Guatemalan State institutions and the lack of respect to human and civil rights for the majority of the population. The central right at issue was land rights, and the Mayan right to continue to their ancestral land. The connection between local geography

and Maya identity cannot be fully explained here, but place holds primacy in the construction of Maya identity, and to this day, land is of utmost importance. Maya have long had an intimate connection with the land they have cultivated for generations, a bond strong enough to bring many Guatemalan refugees back to their ancestral land at the end of the civil war. The persistence of Indigenous communities in light of the most violent attacks by the state suggests that Maya have become familiar with state violence and how to deal with its aftermath through organization for community survival.

In an attempt to contrast these assumptions, I begin my own work with particular and individual experiences of one of the *Ajpu* women, Angela, detailing with her permission the process through which she began to get involved in the guerilla movement, become an important leader during 15 years of fighting, and later organizing among Maya women. While only a small number of *Ajpu* women were able to formally join guerilla movements, participation did not lessen among women in other non-direct-combatant roles, such as preparing food and obtaining supplies.

### **Judith Zur's *Violent Memories* and Linda Green's *Fear as a Way of Life***

In her book *Violent Memories: Mayan War-widows in Guatemala*, Zur writes as though women lived completely apolitical, disempowered, and unaware lives in their pre-widowed past:

Many [Maya] women had not known what a guerilla was until the army accused them of being one and even then, most of them failed to understand the concept—beyond realizing that the label was (and remains) dangerous. Their monolingualism, together with the gender barrier which separates male and female activities, prevents all but the most determined women from participating in the popular movements. (84)

Zur primarily offers a description of widows developing political consciousness only at the exhumations of clandestine graves, years after the conflict had ended: "These monolingual Q'eqchi' women had successfully stood up to those who threatened them, to those who killed their husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers" (qtd. in Sanford 68). She effectively replaces Maya women's earlier political consciousness during the violence with what was a direct result of losing male family members, and offers an analysis of their later widowhood when she describes her interviewees:

Their experiences of repetitive violence are representative of the experiences of a large segment of Guatemala's female, Indian population. For almost every man

killed or kidnapped, a dependent woman—wife, sister, mother or daughter—was left without male protection, a crucial concept in K'iche' social relations. (Zur 8)

Male protection of the female Maya population may be important in maintaining highland social relations, but this relationship was severely disrupted in earlier periods of Guatemalan violence when women were attacked or tortured by soldiers, or raped by members of civil patrol units from their own communities. Again, such acts are represented by Zur as happening first to male political

the construction of widowhood without questioning the larger political roles of these women, assumes that these women feel alone because they are no longer married, and that their behaviour is of interest only because of their roles as widows.

Further, only small pieces of the voices of these women appear here. Green uses personal stories to draw generalizations about the impact of violence on Maya women. She portrays them not as active resisters to the military regime, but as “survivors who now show courage in the face of adversity” (Green 57). Equally problematic is Green’s

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actors and secondarily to their wives, reinforcing the construction of Maya women as passive victims during the war and highlighting women as only politically conscious afterwards. The stories Zur records, for example, are detailed retellings of female lives only in light of male experience, without actual analysis of the term “war-widows” or its construction, nor any mention of whether or not the women claim this term for themselves. She assumes that Maya women were *only* affected by the violence when some lost their husbands. This sense of helplessness that dominates much of the writing on Maya women is an unconcealed attempt to deny the many ways in which Mayan women were effective and committed actors in the struggle and continue to remain agents in the reshaping of Guatemalan politics.

This kind of reporting ignores the ways in which researchers are often the actors and not mere re-tellers of testimonies, assuming such oral histories necessitate the mediation of a researcher. Not only do we not understand why these widows’ husbands were killed, or why the researchers find this central to understanding politics in Guatemala, we have no sense of why Mayan widows’ political agency now takes the form it does: why are these particular widows joining political organizations, seeking justice understood in specific forms, and provoking controversies.

In Linda Green’s *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*, her chapter titled, “From Wives to Widows” concentrates on the “aloneness” these widows now feel. Her research questions themselves are problematic, both those she asks the women directly: “What is most difficult for you, being a widow? Do you want to marry again? What is it like to be a woman alone in the village?” And those she considers in her written text: “How has widowhood reshaped behavior? What is the economic plight of widows?” (84). These questions all focus on

placement of marriage at the center of her research. Marriage is relatively new in Mayan communities, and there is considerable variation in what can be considered traditional marriage practice. What signifies a married couple or that a marriage has taken place, from a couple beginning to live together to spending a day apart from their families. She refers to marriage as consisting of a “complementary division of labour” (Green 95) though women’s labor necessitates their being at home, while men work in the fields where they are able to have social interaction, learn additional languages, and have community responsibility that extends outside the household, implications Green does not consider.

### ***Ajpu*: An Organization of “War-Widows”?**

*Ajpu* was originally associated with the largest politically active widows’ group in Guatemala, the National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows, or CONAVIGUA, which is a national Maya widows organization. In one of my first meetings with *Ajpu*, I asked why the group had broken from CONAVIGUA ten years earlier. One *Ajpu* woman answered, “We’re not widows,” and many other nodded their heads in agreement. When I asked for clarification, someone else spoke up: “The war made me a widow, for example, but it’s not that we’re only interested in finding out why that happened. We know why.” *Ajpu* differed with CONAVIGUA, she added, because *Ajpu* women did not wish to be portrayed primarily as widows, and many were unhappy with the group’s leadership style and resulting decisions about political activity. *Ajpu* was more interested in development work and community restructuring than they were in continuing to look for disappeared family members. One *Ajpu* member spoke to that directly: “We wanted to help ourselves, especially the women who are

older and do not have adequate housing” (interview, April 2003).

Choosing to join the guerilla varied by age in Chiché; many young women joined and cited lack of family responsibility that allowed them the freedom to do so. Many in *Ajpu* admitted they had older sisters to care for parents or children they had left behind. Angela, the woman whose story I offer, attended a private Catholic school in Chichicastenango, about twelve kilometers away, which allowed her autonomy from her family, the experience of resisting authority with the school’s administration when she continued wearing the *traje* of her community and not that of Chichicastenango, as well as an opportunity to meet other politically active young people.

Angela, who became a leader in an important combat unit in the guerilla front between Zacualpa and Joyabaj, speaks of other concrete events in her development: her cousin’s rape by soldiers, her father’s death on a coffee plantation where there wasn’t enough water, her family’s struggle to remain on ancestral land, and her own decision to leave home for a one year at a private Catholic school (interview, December 2006). *Testimonios* of widows that Green and Zur provide, in contrast, highlight the guerilla loss of the war and widows’ consciousness development as something that happened as a result of the ending of the war and ongoing Peace Process, without a clear understanding of a political project that was incredibly hopeful and powerful at the time in which rural Guatemalans were heavily involved.

Women in *Ajpu* cite their involvement in the women’s group as a result of earlier understandings of the Maya situation during the war and later beliefs in the importance of involvement in the community of women. The group has successfully solicited grants from international organizations for housing for rural women and has prioritized politically active *Ajpu* members in development projects. *Ajpu* also began agricultural cooperatives and solicited funding from the municipality to support a full-time women’s coordinator for the group. One of the goals of *Ajpu* is to now achieve development locally. The members do this on local terms with local URNG leadership. The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (in Spanish: Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, or URNG) was a guerrilla movement that emerged in Guatemala in 1982. After a peace process overseen by the United Nations, it agreed to lay down its arms in 1996 and became a legal political party in 1998, an attempt to maintain autonomy from Guatemalan state institutions, by seeking recognition of the group from local cooperatives and local government.

I had one very telling conversation with Angela in July of 2004. When I asked her how she became a member of the guerilla, and what changed the day she walked into the mountain from the bus, she answered that nothing had changed but “only the violence had come.” She paused a moment and added, “No, we were different then, be-

fore the violence,” and then speaks of *Ajpu*, “We cannot have a more revolutionary strategy now, but we hope to sometime soon. We don’t like the [state] programs, but at the same time we need them to make sure the women have houses and food.”

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Many scholars do not consider the political implications of conducting research in these communities and assume similar experiences of women who were widowed. Before beginning my own research, I wanted to ask the question: What are the tensions between the narratives of the lived realities of women that do not necessarily resolve well theoretically? I hope this question will push us to think about category construction and how our assumptions may reflect on the lives we are attempting to (re)present. This is not to say that the category of widowhood is not necessarily relevant or important to study or that Guatemalan widows did not suffer greatly with the loss of their husbands; rather, the category of the Guatemalan “war-widow” was constructed in a variety of contexts that overlapped and helped to erase women’s own experiences. Further, each construction has implications on actual women’s lives.

I hope this short essay will encourage feminists to look at the resulting assumptions of the category of ‘war-widow’ and what this term may conjure for us: perhaps a suffering woman alone, victimized because her husband died innocently and tragically in battle, a battle assumed to be correct. These associations effectively remove the idea of state repression and social and economic structures that serve in the subordination of women. Such analyses allow the actors responsible to remain blameless, develop the war-widow’s certain victimhood, and place all political actors in this false binary: he dies, she suffers afterward—and he was the only political actor there.

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